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WHAT IS THE *“THAT WHICH IS PERFECT”* IN 1 CORINTHIANS 13:10?

by Shawn Brasseaux

What is the *“that which is perfect”* in 1 Corinthians 13:10? We have **no** interest **whatsoever** in appealing to Bible “scholars,” commentaries, a preacher’s study notes, a modern perversion, a denomination, or any other man-made reference or group for enlightenment—they have caused more confusion about this verse than clarity anyway. Let us see what **the Holy Scriptures** teach. *“For what saith **the Scriptures**?”*

Firstly, we must read 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 to get the context of the verse in question: *“[8] Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. [9] For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. [10] But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. [11] When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. [12] For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. [13] And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.”*

Generally, there are three interpretations concerning the meaning of the phrase *“when that which is perfect is come”* of 1 Corinthians 13:10: (1) Some people believe that it is a reference to us dying and going to heaven, (2) others argue that it refers to when Jesus returns to earth, and (3) others affirm that it refers to the completed Bible. Again, if we are really interested in learning what ***the Bible actually teaches***, then it is **mandatory** that we look at ***the Bible*** instead of reading books ***about*** it (commentaries, Greek grammars, interlinears, and so on). In this study, we will systematically evaluate each of these three views and see which one ***agrees with the context of the verse.***

1. IS *“WHEN THAT WHICH IS PERFECT IS COME”* A REFERENCE TO US

DYING AND GOING TO HEAVEN?

Let us take another look at the verse whose phrase is in question: *"But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away"* (1 Corinthians 13:10). This verse says ***nothing*** about ***us going anywhere***, but it ***does*** teach that ***something*** is ***coming to us.*** Something ***coming*** to us and us ***going*** somewhere are two completely different situations. Often, because of verse 12, 1 Corinthians 13:10 is conflated with 1 John 3:2. However, 1 Corinthians 13:12 and 1 John 3:2 are ***not*** cross-references—the contexts are discussing separate issues.

Read 1 John 3:1-2: *"[1] Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. [2] Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is."* Because of a famous hymn, verse 2—*"for we shall see him as he is"*—is used to explain 1 Corinthians 13:12's phrase *"face to face."* It is then assumed that 1 Corinthians 13:10—*"when that which is perfect is come"*—is descriptive of us going to heaven and seeing Jesus for who He really is, when we no longer wonder what He looks like but when we actually see Him *"face to face."* Yet, beloved, a hymnal is ***not*** our authority; it is ***not*** inspired of God. Just because someone wrote a hymn lacking doctrinal clarity and accuracy, does ***not*** mean that we are to accept the hymn for sake of tradition. We should discard the hymn and we should believe the Bible for what it says rather than that what it is presumed to teach. After all, the hymn is to be written based on Bible truth; the Bible is the authority, not the hymnal. It would save us much disappointment and misery when we realize that the opinions of men are ***not*** going to profit us in eternity.

The phrase *"when that which is perfect is come"* has **nothing** to do with us dying and going to heaven. It is talking about something coming to us, ***not*** us going to a place. The real reason why people (particularly charismatics) take the view of us dying going to heaven in reference to 1 Corinthians 13:10 is so that the spiritual gifts—especially the gift of tongues—can be viewed as still operating (for, it is said, the spiritual gifts will not cease until we go to heaven). This is a very faulty position to take, for there is **nothing** in 1 Corinthians chapter 13 about dying and going to heaven. On the authority of the Scriptures, we must reject this view.

2. IS *"WHEN THAT WHICH IS PERFECT IS COME"* A REFERENCE TO WHEN JESUS COMES BACK TO EARTH?

This view is similar to view #1 because it too is based on a faulty reading of 1 John 3:1-2: *"[1] Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. [2] Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is."*

Certainly, 1 John 3:2 is speaking of Jesus Christ's return to planet Earth (often called His "Second Coming"), but to link this to 1 Corinthians 13:12 and then interpret verse 10 in light of it, it is to read something into Paul's writings that the Apostle did not write. Despite what the Scofield Reference Bible has in its marginal notes, 1 Corinthians 13:12 and 1 John 3:2 are ***not*** cross-references—the contexts are discussing separate issues. As it is said, a text without a ***context*** makes one a ***conman!*** We must consider contexts whenever looking at any verse.

Additionally, to say *"that which is perfect is come"* is a person, is to support strange and awkward grammar. Do you actually think that Jesus Christ would be called *"that which is perfect?"* It is quite clear that this phrase is referring to an inanimate object, ***not*** a person. The phrase *"that which is perfect is come"* of 1 Corinthians 13:10 does ***not*** refer to Jesus Christ or His return.

By the way, modern translations re-translate 1 Corinthians 13:10 in order to make its teaching less clear, probably in attempt to make it more appealing to those who want the verse to support their denominational doctrine (if left alone, the verse would put their religious system out of business!). The Ryrie Study Bible, New American Standard Version, for example, reads in 1 Corinthians 13:10, "but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away." Its footnote says, "The perfect. A reference to Christ's second coming." Nothing could be further from the truth—the context does ***not*** allow such a strange view!

The real reason why people (particularly charismatics) take this view of *"that which is perfect"* refers to Jesus Christ's return is, like view #1, so that the spiritual gifts—especially the gift of tongues—can be viewed as still operating (for, it is said, the spiritual gifts will not cease until Jesus comes back). Like view #1, this is a very faulty position to take, for there is **nothing** in 1 Corinthians chapter 13 about Jesus coming back to Earth. On the authority of the Scriptures, we must reject this view as well.

3. IS *"WHEN THAT WHICH IS PERFECT IS COME"* A REFERENCE TO WHEN THE BIBLE IS COMPLETED?

Let us take another look at the verse whose phrase is in question: *"But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away"* (1 Corinthians 13:10). As previously mentioned, this verse says ***nothing*** about ***us going anywhere***, but it does teach that ***something*** is ***coming to us.*** The question is, ***what*** is coming to us

We should look at the verse in its context (1 Corinthians 13:8-13): *"[8] Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. [9] For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. [10] But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. [11] When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. [12] For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. [13] And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity."*

The thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians is the heart of Paul's three-chapter-long discourse on spiritual gifts and the Dispensation of Grace. The Corinthians were spiritually immature (1 Corinthians 3:1-2), and they were ignorant of spiritual gifts and they were misusing and abusing them (1 Corinthians 12:1–14:40). Rather than focusing on sound doctrine, the Corinthians, like today's charismatics, were too engaged in emotional experiences—especially the gift of tongues (refer to the 40 verses of 1 Corinthians chapter 14). Paul wrote chapters 12-14 to show them that their Christian lives were not functioning properly, and if they did not correct their thinking, when the spiritual gifts would fall away, their Christian lives would fall apart!

- 1 Corinthians 13:11: *"When I was a child, I spake as a child."* This would be a reference to the gift of tongues (verse 8), the ability to speak forth God's Word in intelligent human languages never formally learned.
- 1 Corinthians 13:11: *"When I was a child… I understood as a child."* This would be a reference to the gift of knowledge (verse 8), the supernatural ability of knowing and understanding deep spiritual truths of God's Word before they were written down in Scripture (see verse 2).
- 1 Corinthians 13:11: *"When I was a child… I thought as a child."* This would be a reference to the gift of prophecy (verse 8), the ability to preach and identify God's Word before it was written.
- 1 Corinthians 13:11: *"But when I became a man, I put away childish things."* This would be spiritual maturity, when **all** revelation from God is given. It is

then that we do away with the immature things.

Paul wrote that there was coming a day when the gift of prophecy would fail, the gift of tongues would cease, and the gift of knowledge would vanish away (verse 8). The Church the Body of Christ would move away from doctrinal immaturity and into doctrinal maturity. In other words, the completed revelation from God would be given, and this would bring about mature saints, people who fully grasped what God wanted them to know (Ephesians 4:11-14).

Let us look back at 1 Corinthians 13:12: *"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known."* Paul acknowledged that he had not received all of the information God wanted him to have and give to us. Later, the Apostle wrote in 2 Corinthians 12:1: *"I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord."* Up to the time he had written 1 Corinthians during Acts, Paul had already penned Galatians, and 1 and 2 Thessalonians. He still had to write 2 Corinthians and Romans. Years afterward, once Acts ended, Paul wrote his prison epistles—Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, 1 Timothy, Titus, and 2 Timothy. All 13 Pauline epistles are the full revelation of God for this the Dispensation of Grace.

After all, Paul wrote in Colossians 1:25-26 that one of his divinely-ordained roles was to complete God's Word: *"[25] Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God; [26] Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints."* Ephesians 3:1-4 explains: *"[1] For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles, [2] If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward: [3] How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words, [4] Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ)…."* We learn the knowledge God revealed first to Paul, by reading his epistles of Romans through Philemon.

"*When that which is perfect is come*" is a reference to when partial knowledge and partial prophesying are done away. Verses 9 and 10 again: *"[9] For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. [10] But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away."* This is talking about the completion of the Bible's canon of books, which was settled in God's mind in the first century A.D. Once Paul wrote the epistle of 2 Timothy, the Bible was complete, and there was no more revelation needed from God (cf. Colossians 1:25 and 2 Timothy 3:16-17). This is the only view that the context of 1 Corinthians 13:10 allows. For

God to have us grow up spiritually is something He wants ***now***, ***not*** when we go to heaven (view #1) or when Jesus comes back (view #2): God wants mature Christians ***now*** (view #3).

By the way, the word "*perfect*" in 1 Corinthians 13:10 is ***not*** sinless perfection, but the completion of God's revelation (the Holy Bible) and the spiritual maturity it brings to those who read and believe it. Notice some examples of how the Scriptures use the term "*perfect*" in that sense:

- Philippians 3:15: *"Let us therefore, as many as be **perfect**, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you."*
- Colossians 1:28: *"Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man **perfect** in Christ Jesus:"*
- Colossians 4:12: *"Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand **perfect** and complete in all the will of God."*
- 2 Timothy 3:16-17: *"[16] All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: [17] That the man of God may be **perfect**, throughly furnished unto all good works."*
- Hebrews 5:14: *"But strong meat belongeth to them that are **of full age**, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil."*

CONCLUSION

Generally, there are three primary interpretations concerning the meaning of the phrase *"that which is perfect is come"* of 1 Corinthians 13:10: (1) Some people believe that that is a reference to us dying and going to heaven, (2) others believe that it refers to when Jesus returns to earth, and (3) others believe that it refers to the completed Bible. The only sound view—in light of context, in light of grammar, in light of Scripture—is that 1 Corinthians 13:10 is referring to the completed canon of Scripture of the first century A.D. There are **no** spiritual gifts operating today because we have the completed 66-book Holy Bible. If we are to be people of faith, we must throw away our doctrinally-deficient hymns, we must discard our faulty theological systems, and we must break away from our pre-conceived ideas. We are to embrace the simple truths of the English Bible. In the end, God's Word—***not*** theological systems, ***not*** Bible commentaries, ***not*** preachers or teachers—**alone** will matter.

Also see:

» ***Must I pray or speak in "tongues?"***

» ***Can I trust the Holy Bible?*** (TEMPORARILY UNAVAILABLE)

» ***What about spiritual gifts in the Dispensation of Grace?*** (TEMPORARILY UNAVAILABLE)

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